

CHAPTER 15A - WILDERNESS

15A.1 RESOURCE OVERVIEW

15A.1.1 Background and History

In 1964, Congress passed the Wilderness Act, establishing a national system of lands for the purpose of preserving a representative sample of ecosystems in a natural condition for the benefit of future generations. Up to 1976, lands considered for and designated as wilderness were managed by the U.S. Forest Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, or the National Park Service. With the passage of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) in 1976, Congress directed the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to inventory, study, and recommend which public lands under its administration should be designated wilderness. In 1979 the BLM began an inventory of 22 million acres of public land in Utah, ultimately finding 95 areas (over 3.2 million acres) that possessed wilderness character.

15A.1.2 Purpose of the Planning Process

Within the boundaries of the Moab Field Office area, 11 areas established as WSAs in the 1980s are being managed to preserve their wilderness values until Congress determines whether they should be designated as wilderness. Table 15A-1 summarizes these areas, and Figure 15A-1 shows their location. Should any of these areas, in whole or in part, be released by Congress from WSA status, proposals in the released area would be examined on a case by case basis for consistency with the goals and objectives of the RMP decisions. Actions inconsistent with RMP goals and objectives would be deferred until completion of requisite plan amendments. Because the management direction of the released land would continue in accordance with the goals and objectives established in the RMP, there is no separate analysis required in the Land Use Plan to address resource impacts if any WSAs are released.

15A.2 SPECIFIC MANDATES AND AUTHORITY

15A.2.1 Legal Authorities

The mandates for management of existing WSAs and Wilderness Areas in land use planning are:

- Wilderness Act of 1964
- National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA)
- Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) regulations at 40 CFR 1500–1508.
- Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976, 43 USC 1701, et seq., Sections 201 and 202

15A.2.2 BLM Guidance

BLM policies and guidance providing for management of existing WSAs and consideration of values associated with wilderness characteristics in land use planning are detailed in:

- Manual Handbook H-1601-1, Land Use Planning Handbook

- Manual Handbook H-8550-1, Interim Management Policy and Guidelines for Lands Under Wilderness Review (IMP)

15.3A CURRENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

15A.3.1 Designated Wilderness

In October 2000, the President signed legislation establishing the Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area (NCA). The NCA legislation included designation of the Black Ridge Wilderness, of which 5,200 acres are in the Moab Field Office area. This Wilderness is managed as part of the NCA out of the Grand Junction Field Office as part of the Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area and is outside the scope of the Moab RMP process.

15A.3.2 Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs)

With completion of the inventory in November 1980 of the inventory begun in 1979, the BLM designated 11 WSAs lying completely or partly within the Moab Field Office area: Desolation Canyon, Floy Canyon, Coal Canyon, Spruce Canyon, Flume Canyon, Westwater Canyon, Black Ridge, Lost Spring Canyon, Mill Creek Canyon, Negro Bill Canyon, and Behind the Rocks. The WSAs, established under the authority of Section 603(c) of FLPMA, are being managed to preserve their wilderness values according to the Interim Management Policy and Guidelines for Land under Wilderness Review (IMP) and will continue to be managed in that manner until Congress either designates them wilderness or releases them for other uses. (Since 1980, 2,156 acres of Lost Spring Canyon WSA have been transferred to the National Park Service, and 5,200 acres of the Black Ridge WSA have been designated wilderness under the management of the Colorado Canyons NCA). Only Congress can designate or release Section 603 WSAs, and their status will not change as a result of the Moab resource management planning process. Therefore, they will not be addressed in detail in this Analysis of the Management Situation (AMS). Should any of these areas, in whole or in part, be released by Congress from WSA status, proposals in the released area would be examined on a case by case basis for consistency with the goals and objectives of the RMP decisions. Actions inconsistent with RMP goals and objectives would be deferred until completion of requisite plan amendments. Because the management direction of the released land would continue in accordance with the goals and objectives established in the RMP, there is no separate analysis required in the Land Use Plan to address resource impacts if any WSAs are released.

A discussion of the current resource values and uses in each WSA, established in 1980 under the authority of Section 603(c) of FLPMA, can be found in the *Utah BLM Statewide Wilderness Final Environmental Impact Statement* (BLM 1990)

Table 15A-1. BLM Wilderness Study Areas under Jurisdiction of the Moab FO¹	
Name	Acreage
Behind the Rocks	12,635
Black Ridge	52 ²
Coal Canyon	60,755

Desolation Canyon	81,603 ³
Floy Canyon	72,605
Flume Canyon	50,800
Lost Spring Canyon	1,624 ⁴
Mill Creek Canyon	9,780
Negro Bill Canyon	7,820
Spruce Canyon	20,990
Westwater Canyon	31,160
Totals	348,815
1 Except as noted, all acreage figures are from Utah BLM Statewide Wilderness Final Environmental Impact Statement (BLM 1990).	
2 Acres remaining after creation of Black Ridge Wilderness	
3 Desolation Canyon WSA spans three Field Offices; acreage shown is for Moab Field Office only	
4 Acres remaining after transfer of part of this WSA to National Park Service	

15A.4 EXISTING MANAGEMENT DIRECTION IN THE GRAND RESOURCE AREA RMP (1985)

15A.4.1 Existing Planning Decisions

Existing management direction currently is provided in the Grand Resource Area RMP.

The RMP does not include any specific decisions regarding designation of WSAs or recommendations for wilderness designation. The only specific reference discusses management of WSAs. The RMP states that no suitability (for wilderness designation) analysis is in the RMP and that WSAs will be managed according to the IMP. Further, the RMP directs the BLM to monitor the WSAs to ensure that their values are protected for congressional consideration. The RMP goes on to say that if Congress designates any WSA as wilderness, a wilderness management plan would be prepared guiding management of that wilderness. If Congress does not designate a WSA as wilderness and releases the land for other uses, the management prescriptions of the RMP would apply to that land. These management prescriptions are described in detail for each specific WSA in the RMP (1985: Appendix G) and are briefly summarized in Table 15A-2.

Table 15A-2: Summary of Management Prescriptions for WSAs in Current (1985) RMP, if Released by Congress during the Life of the Plan			
WSA	OHV Designation	Oil and Gas Leasing	Other¹
Behind the Rocks	Closed	Generally closed; no surface occupancy near boundary	
Coal Canyon	Open	Mostly open with special stipulations	Several in-stream drop structures; one prescribed burn and seeding; numerous watershed treatments
Desolation Canyon	Limited within 1.5 miles of east bank of Green River; otherwise open	Closed to new leasing within 2 miles of east bank of Green River; otherwise open with special stipulations	

Floy Canyon	Open	Mostly open with special stipulations	Several in-stream drop structures; several prescribed burns and seedings
Flume Canyon	Open	Mostly open with special stipulations	Several in-stream drop structures; one prescribed burn and seeding; one commercial bear hunting camp
Lost Spring Canyon	Open	Open with standard stipulations	
Mill Creek Canyon	Limited to designated roads and trails	Open with standard stipulations except no surface occupancy in Mill Creek watershed	
Negro Bill Canyon	Limited to designated roads and trails	Open with standard stipulations	No grazing in lower 3 miles of canyon; canyon portion managed as ONA
Spruce Canyon	Open	Open with special stipulations	Several in-stream drop structures; one prescribed burn and seeding
Westwater Canyon	Mostly open; some closed and limited areas	Mix of closed, open with standard stipulations, and open with special stipulations	One prescribed burn and seeding; allow commercial survival school outings
1 Except as noted, all WSAs would be open to mining and would be subject to limited fire suppression. More detail on all management prescriptions for the WSAs can be found in Appendix G of the Grand Resource Area RMP.			

15A.4.2 Existing Management

FLPMA directs the BLM to preserve the wilderness character of existing WSAs until Congress decides whether or not they should be designated wilderness.

Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) - Section 603 (c) of FLPMA tells the BLM how to manage WSAs:

During the period of review of such areas and until Congress has determined otherwise, the Secretary shall continue to manage such lands according to his authority under this Act and other applicable law in a manner so as not to impair the suitability of such areas for preservation as wilderness ...

This language is referred to as the "nonimpairment" mandate or standard, and will remain in effect until Congress acts on the President's wilderness recommendation for WSAs in Utah. Should Congress release a WSA, those lands included in the (former) WSA will be managed according to the current land use plan.

"Interim management" of WSAs under the "nonimpairment" standard has several practical effects, which include the following:

- WSAs must be managed so as not to impair their suitability for preservation as wilderness. This standard applies to all uses and activities except those specifically exempted from this standard by FLPMA (grandfathered uses and valid existing rights).
- Activities that are permitted in WSAs (except valid existing rights and grandfathered uses) must be temporary, create no new surface disturbance, and not involve the permanent placement of structures. There are exceptions to this standard.

- Grazing, mining, and mineral leasing uses that existed as of the passage of FLPMA (October 21, 1976) may continue in the same manner and degree, even if this would impair wilderness suitability.
- WSAs may not be closed to location under the mining laws in order to preserve their wilderness character (although the wilderness character of the area cannot be impaired through actions to perfect claims located after October 21, 1976). Valid existing rights will be recognized.
- WSAs will be managed to prevent unnecessary and undue degradation.

The BLM's IMP (BLM 1995) provides specific policy and guidance for management of all resource values and uses in WSAs. WSAs are managed according to the IMP. Any lands released from WSA status will be managed according to the current land use plan.

15A.5 ISSUES OR CONCERNS

- Management of existing WSAs, should Congress release them from WSA status
- Fire prescriptions in WSAs, including fuels treatments
- Commercial use in WSAs
- WSA management needs (for example, conditions under which backcountry airstrips might be used, control of illegal woodcutting, group size thresholds)
- Management objectives within WSAs, including under what conditions public motorized access on inventoried routes should be restricted or curtailed to avoid impairment

15A.6 MANAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS

Opportunities could be available within the RMP to manage for preserving the natural landscape, as well as for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, in certain areas:

1. OHV designations - Certain areas could be closed to OHV use. Inventoried ways in WSAs could be closed to motorized and mechanized use to enhance opportunities for primitive recreation.
2. Fire management - Portions of these areas could be placed in a limited or zero wildfire suppression zone, to minimize impacts to naturalness from activities such as the construction of fire roads and vegetative clearing, and to restore native vegetation communities.
3. Wildlife - Management techniques could be used to enhance wildlife habitat, especially in those areas in which wildlife has been noted as a supplemental value.